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ABSTRACT

The Lindeman Center for Community Empowerment at Northern Illinois University is seeking to relate its resources to the "invisible poor." The Center works with minority and other poor communities and groups in Chicago to strengthen and support them in their self-help efforts. One of the tools for empowerment that the Center is using is participatory research (PR). PR has been used by and for people who are exploited and oppressed by the dominant power structures of society, whether in the Third World or in the United States and Canada. It is an educational process involving three interrelated parts: (1) collective definition and investigation of a problem by a group of people struggling to deal with it; (2) group analysis of the underlying causes of their problem; and (3) group action to attempt to solve the problem. This approach is not a common research paradigm in higher education. Many higher education institutions and other professional organizations make their consultative and research services available to low income groups and communities. However, as possessors of "expert" knowledge, professionals often retain decision-making power and further disenfranchise the poor. More adult educators and other professionals are recognizing the potential of PR as an empowering process. The tool has been used successfully in a rural community in Nicaragua and in Appalachia. The Lindeman Center has used PR with public housing residents in Chicago. In one development, residents are learning to manage their property and take more control of their lives. Another group of "invisible poor" with whom the Lindeman Center is working in Chicago is welfare rights organizations. The Center conducted a workshop to help young women identify their leadership qualities and prepare for leadership roles. The PR approach represents an underused tool in empowering the poor, powerless, and disenfranchised groups in the United States. (KC)

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EMPOWERING THE POOR:

PARTICIPATORY RESEARCH AS AN EDUCATIONAL TOOL

by

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The more that people see themselves as producers of knowledge, the more they see themselves as producers of change.

An Economic Experience Workbook (in process), Highlander Center

Information is freedom!

Rosita Henry, a public housing resident

In urging participatory research, I am not speaking of the involvement of classes already aligned with power. These classses, as we have seen, already have at their disposal all the mechanisms necessary to shape and inform our explanation of the world. No, it is the powerless that I would direct our attention.

Tom Heaney, Lindeman Center

The Other America

Twenty-five years ago, Michael Harrington wrote a powerful, small book, The Other America, which called urgent attention to the plight of the "invisible poor", the "underdeveloped nation in our midst"--those Americans existing in rural and urban poverty in the midst of the affluent society. The "Other America" still exists in our midst and is still largely invisible.

The Lindeman Center, Northern Illinois University, (full name: The Lindeman Center for Community Empowerment through Education) is seeking to relate its resources to the "invisible poor". The Center works with minority and other

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poor communities and groups in Chicago to strengthen and support them in their self-help efforts. Education, as conceived by the Center, does not imply a prescribed curriculum, but rather a process. The community, in company with the Center, undertakes the demanding tasks of clarifying its underlying problems, defining its goals and examining alternative approaches and resources for achieving those goals. Only after this kind of process does it develop and carry out a plan of action, subject always to ongoing evaluation and modification by the community group.

Participatory Research as a Tool

One of the tools for empowerment which the Center is using is Participatory Research (PR). PR has been utilized for and by people who are exploited and oppressed by the dominant power structures of society, especially Third World peoples in Asia, Latin America and Africa, as well as their counterparts in the U.S. and Canada. It is an educational process involving three inter-related parts:

1) Collective definition and investigation of a problem by a group of people struggling to deal with it;
2) Group analysis of the underlying causes of their problem;
3) Group action to attempt to solve the problem.

This approach is not a common research paradigm in higher education. Many higher education institutions and other professional organizations make their consultative and research services available to low income groups and communities. But as possessors of "expert" knowledge, professionals frequently arrogate decision-making power and further disenfranchise the poor. They define the problem. They study the community and gather requisite data. They interpret the data and advise local groups as to appropriate courses of action. The research findings might well provide these experts with materials for a mongraph or book. Graduate students receive valuable field experience. While helped, perhaps, with a short-term solution, their problem-solving capacities have not been strengthened. The community, in fact, may well have an increased sense of inadequacy, of dependence on "educated outsiders" in coping with future problems.

Fortunately, in response to the need for people to assume control of their own lives and communities, a increasing number of adult educators and other professionals in the Third World recognize the potential of PR as an empowering process.

PR in a Nicaraguan Community and in Appalachia

One recent example from a rural community in Nicaragua, following the revolution, involved formerly landless peasants who learned, through participating in the research process, how to plan and organize the use of their newly-distributed land. Using a questionaire which they took house to house, they gathered information about the resources in their own community which furnished the basis for community-wide discussion and planning. To facilitate small-group discussion, they were assisted in producing a slide show to document their lives and their research efforts, and was in itself empowering. As an adult educator assisting the project, Lisa Veneklasen reported, "The project stimulated valuable discussion and resulted in several significant changes in the organization of the farm cooperative as well as the community in general."

In Appalachia, often referred to as the Third World in the United States, Highlander Center has been making varied use of PR in working with struggling mountain people. One project involved citizen groups researching land and mineral ownership in their impoverished counties of Kentucky, Tennessee, and elsewhere in a six state region. Stimulated by workshops at Highlander on how to use research as well as to do it, local actions have been undertaken against tax-dodging corporate landowners and others. Their research continues on landowner violations. In addition, a product of their PR efforts was the definitive study of land ownership in the region.

Recently, Highlander has been working with groups in communities, such as Jellico, Tennessee, who are learning to do their own research in order to understand the changing economy and develop ways to initiate local economic development projects.

The Other Chicago: Lindeman Center's use of PR

The largest group of "invisible poor" in Chicago are the people who live, isolated physically and psychologically from the larger community, in high and low rise public housing developments--145,000 primarily black women heads-of-households and their children, and an unrecorded number of men, fathers and sons of the residents.

In the fall of 1984, with hope stirring in minority and other low income communities following the election of Chicago's first black mayor, Lindeman Center sponsored a week-

end workshop with a group of public housing residents from three developments. Its purposes, as defined with participants, were to learn about resident management from tenant management leaders in other cities and to begin developing their own action agenda for improving life in their developments.

The process, after that first promising weekend, was slowed to a stop. Patronage leaders among the residents, who had been rewarded for cooperating with the "old system", did not want to share their power and privileges. They worked to undermind emerging leadership. Management in the Chicago Housing Authority itself, although it endorsed the goal of increased resident participation in decision-making, continued to act as "the Authority". The staff rejected outright the proposal of the resident group to do research among their neighbors on problems and recommendations for change. The Authority indicated that it had professional researchers who would do research if it was needed (from their point of view, it was never needed).

Two years later, we are working with a determined group of residents in another development, Dearborn Homes which includes 16 buildings and houses 2500 residents. They had heard about the frustrated hopes and plans of the other developments and came to the Lindeman Center requesting that we work with them to achieve resident management. Their first concern was not research on resident problems, but rather to learn more about resident management and "to do something visible" which would tell others what they, as residents, can do for themselves.

In response to their agenda, a jointly developed series of six workshops on management were offered to groups of residents--some 80 participants in all. In addition, supported by public art funds, a group of Dearborn Homes youth researched and painted three murals on their view of "The Past", "The Present", and "The Future". The largest of these is an outdoor mural portraying resident management as protective arms around their buildings as children and youth play happily in a park-like area.

This fall, the resident leaders (now incorporated as the Dearborn Homes Resident Management Corporation) are planning to undertake a PR project. Realizing that they need to build a broad base of support, they intend to interview their neighbors and involve them in identifying critical problems, and developing collective solutions. In a recent letter to a foundation the board of the Resident Management Corporation described what it plans to do.

> "The Authority...and most important we ourselves need to know how and under what conditions we, as managers, can effectively improve the living

> conditions at Dearborn Homes. To do this we are learning to be "resident researchers", able to tap the knowledge of officials and experts but also to involve a team of residents in interviewing other residents, youth, heads-of-families, older people, about current problems and needs. We also plan interview long-time residents about Dearborn Homes as it used to be."

This, they believe, will lead to self-help action and, in turn, move them closer to resident management. The role of the Lindeman Center will be to hold bi-weekly workshop sessions to share research findings and plan next steps. There will also be monthly meetings to discuss what is being learned with other residents and to invite their thinking.

Another group of "invisible poor" in Chicago and elsewhere with whom the Lindeman Center is working, are welfare rights organizations. Today, welfare reform is widely discussed among politicians and professionals advocates of the poor. Unfortunately, they view adult education, job training and basic education, merely as a means to remove people from the welfare rolls. Those least heard from are recipients themselves, especially young women who are single parents. It is this group with whom Lindeman Center is beginning to work, in company with several community-based organizations committed to self-help solutions.

Initially the problem has been to identify young welfare recipients with leadership potential. Most welfare rights leaders are older women who became leaders in the sixties, and who cannot imagine the young as leaders. In fact, many young women cannot imagine themselves as leaders. In response to the need of these young women to think through what they can do to "break the poverty cycle" which confronts them and their children, the Lindeman Center is sponsoring a residential workshop for 20 to 25 participants. The setting for this workshop will be away from the city, and away from the pressures of day-to-day living. Together they will identify their central problems which have kept them tied to the welfare system, begin to analyze what they need to know in order to address these problems, and develop plans for gathering needed information and identifying supportive resources.

This residential workshop is a first step in the PR process. The young women will begin to develop the kind of rapport among themselves needed to speak with confidence to established leaders and professional welfare advocates, and to persist in the task of gathering information and identifying resource persons and groups.

The Other America: The Potential of Participatory Research

For many years, American adult educators, with well-intentioned missionary zeal, have shared their "wisdom" as practitioners and researchers with people in Third World countries. Meanwhile, we have failed to effectively respond to our own "invisible poor", to our own Third World. Participatory Research, along with popular education, represent promising, seldom explored approaches for empowering the many powerless and disenfranchised groups in our midst, including the poor and "the New Poor", the farmers who have lost their land the industrial workers who have lost their jobs.

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